THE BRITISH EMPIRE

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WHITE MAN'S GRAVE

Winning West Africa's Fever-ridden Hinterland

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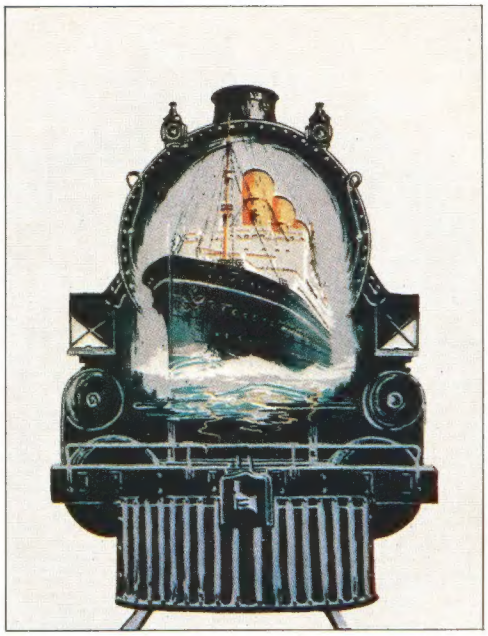

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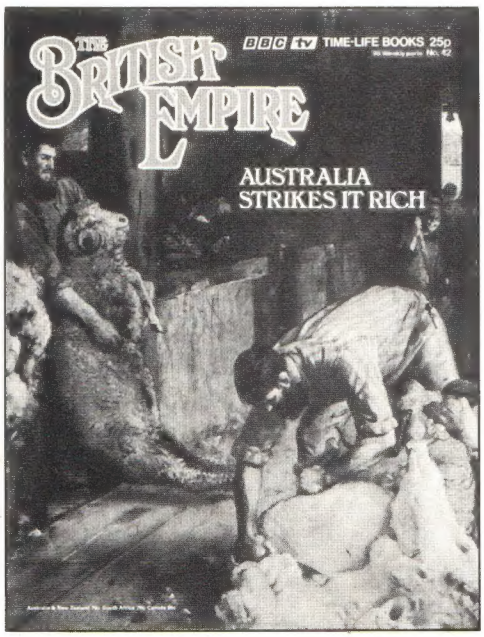

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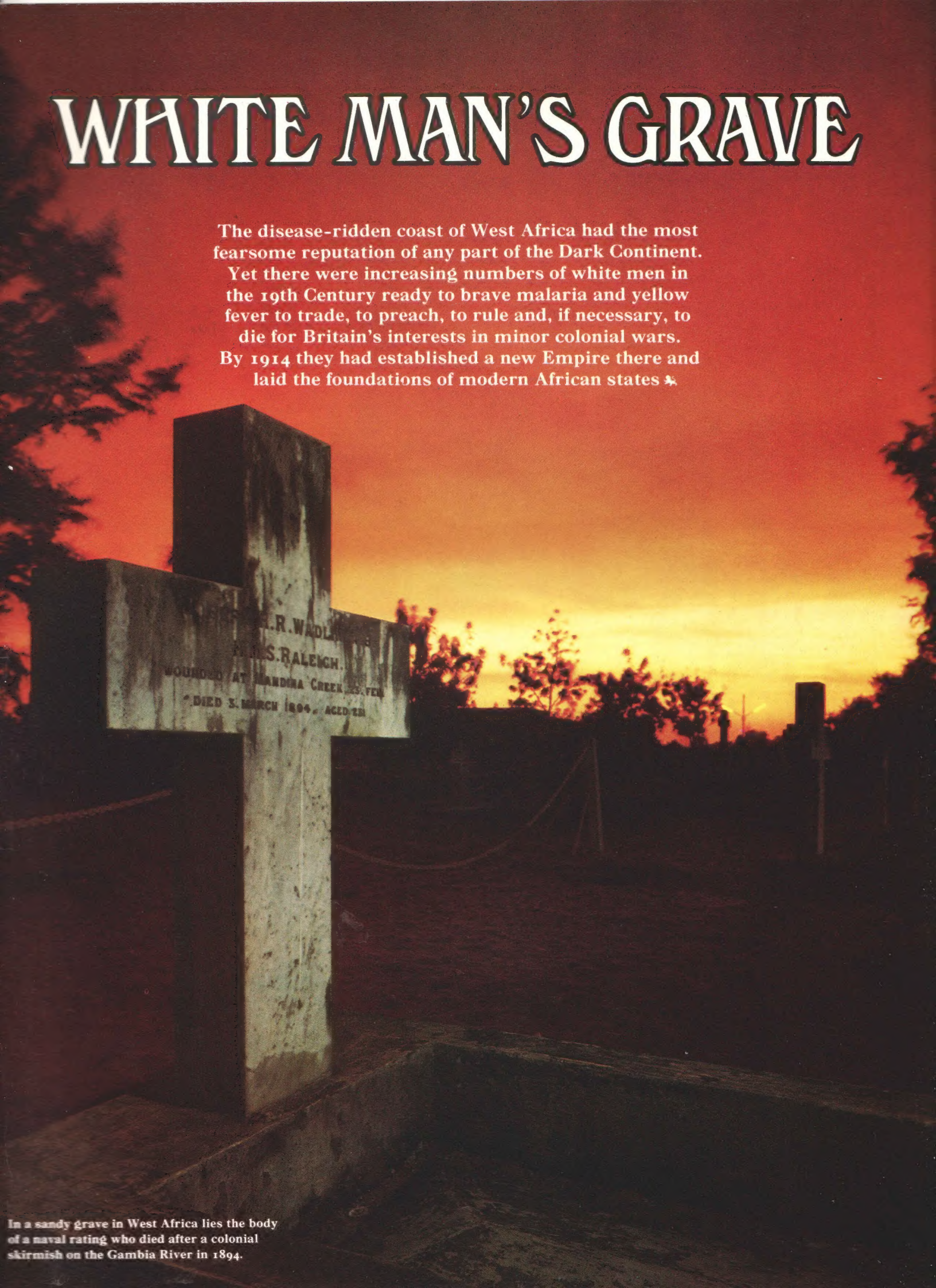
WHITE MAN'S GRAVE

The disease-ridden coast of West Africa had the most fearsome reputation of any part of the Dark Continent. Yet there were increasing numbers of white men in the 19th Century ready to brave malaria and yellow fever to trade, to preach, to rule and, if necessary, to die for Britain's interests in minor colonial wars. By 1914 they had established a new Empire there and laid the foundations of modern African states



In a sandy grave in West Africa lies the body of a naval rating who died after a colonial skirmish on the Gambia River in 1894.

By Jim Hicks

"When you have made up your mind to go to West Africa," said a 19th-Century veteran of that grim coast, "the very best thing you can do is to get it unmade and go to Scotland instead; but if your intelligence is not strong enough to do so, abstain from exposing yourself to the direct rays of the sun, take four grains of quinine every day . . . and get some introductions to the Wesleyans; they are the only people on the Coast who have got a hearse with feathers."

It was for Sierra Leone, which in 1807 had become Britain's first West African colony, that the term "White Man's Grave" was originally coined. It had been conceived as a home for slaves freed after slavery was declared illegal in Britain in 1772. A humanitarian doctor suggested Sierra Leone would be "a permanent and comfortable establishment in a most pleasant, fertile climate." It was a virtual paradise, he explained, "where a man possessed of a change of clothing, a wood-axe, a hoe and a pocket-knife could soon make himself at home."

But reality was very different. The first batch of slaves had mostly been flamboyantly dressed flunkeys in stately homes and town mansions. Easy prey to tropical diseases, without any proper system of government-sponsored hygiene, they died in scores. Missionaries who followed them out there found things equally tough. They were only being realistic when they spoke of "seeking martyrdom" there. One society lost 53 of the first 79 it sent out. "I looked upon the land," wrote James Norman of his arrival at Freetown in 1821, "as my burying place."

Government servants fared no better. During one seven-month period Sierra Leone went through four acting governors; two died in office and another, mindful of his predecessors' fates, left the colony when he fell ill. On another occasion, a governor returning from a trip found his administration had no lawyer, no chief justice, no secretary, no chaplain, and only one schoolmaster. Fortunately, a carpenter had survived. "There is nothing but making coffins going on," that tradesman sighed, "three and four a day."

The story was similar elsewhere in Britain's West African outposts. In 1824,

The blood-sucking Anopheles mosquito (above) injects its victims with malaria germs, a fact discovered only in 1898. Until then, travellers fought malaria with medicines from chests like the one on the left, unaware that only quinine (marked quinae sulph.) had a lasting effect.

half the 600 soldiers garrisoned in the Gold Coast died within a few months, and the House of Commons was told in 1826 that of 1,567 troops sent out in the previous two years, 905 were dead.

Europeans died mainly from malaria and yellow fever – or from the "cures," which were nearly as dangerous as the ailments. Blood-letting was common. Leeches were standard colonial surgical equipment, being placed on the patient's shaved head to "suck out" the fever. Great blisters were raised with steaming cloths or mustard packs and then broken to drain away the fever. On the same principle, salivating was induced by calomel, often at the expense of the victim's teeth, or by quicksilver and mercury, an even more drastic "treatment" that inflamed the mouth and sometimes caused the sick man to suffocate on his own swollen tongue.

The diseases were generally attributed to "a peculiar state of the atmosphere." One colonial surgeon who embraced this "bad air" theory was more precise; he believed the miasma originated across the estuary from Freetown and that a careful observer could actually see it coming slowly across the water. It was not until the 1890s that scientists knew mosquitoes spread malaria and yellow fever.

West Africa's unhealthiness confined Englishmen to the coast. An account of an 1832 expedition up the Niger explains why few were willing to make such a journey into the hinterland:

"On the 18th, Mr. Andrew Clark expired with the utmost calmness, drinking a cup of coffee. In the afternoon James Dunbar, one of the firemen, died. On the 19th, my chief mate, Mr. Goldie, and my sailmaker, John Brien, followed; and on the morning of the 20th, our supercargo, Mr. Jordan, expired. In the evening of the 20th, Mr. Swinton also died. Having been a resident many years in the Indian Archipelago, he thought that no climate could affect him.

"A few hours after his death, Mr. Millar, our chief engineer, followed him. On the 21st November, we lost William Ramm, the steward; William Parry, an apprentice; and Gardner, a seaman. On the 22nd William Ellison, the second mate, and a fine lad about 16 years old whom Captain Harris had adopted in Dublin. The 23rd of November was a day of respite; but on the 24th, Hugh Cosnahan, a seaman, died, and for another interval the mortality ceased." Forty-eight Europeans began the journey; nine returned. For a decade, no one dared try again.

On another expedition, in 1841, more than a third of 145 white men died of malaria before the project was abandoned, and commercial interest in the area was set back another ten years. Ironically, they carried supplies of quinine, but were not aware that it could prevent the disease. They used it only when a patient showed signs of recovery.

Quinine's efficacy was not appreciated until 1854, when William Baikie led a party well dosed with it on a 900-mile journey through the interior. Not a single European died. It was an important event. The great Niger River was now open to trade. After clinging to the edge of West Africa for centuries, the British at last began moving inland.

Quinine was not the end of sickness or death for Englishmen in the area; it simply improved the chances for survival enough to make the gamble worth while. A gamble it remained. Mary Kingsley, niece of the novelist Charles Kingsley and herself a

Medicinal leeches (below), used for the time-honoured "cure" of blood-letting that was thought effective against fevers, were stored in decorated jars with air-holes in the lids.

popular writer about West Africa, recorded a conversation on an outward voyage near the end of the last century. "Do you get anything but fevers down there?" asks the worried newcomer. "Haven't time as a general rule," the veteran replies, "but I know some fellows get kraw kraw. And the Portuguese itch, ulcers, the Guinea worm and the smallpox." West Africa was still no health farm.

Englishmen were not exposed to the abysmal living – and dying – conditions of West Africa to fulfil some grand scheme of Empire expansion. During the 19th Century, British governments tried to avoid involvement in the region, impoverished, unhealthy, and troubled by native warfare as it was. To the nation as a whole, it held little economic attraction; in the 1840s it was noted that there was more trade with the Isle of Skye than with the whole of West Africa.

For the most part, this corner of Empire was acquired and developed because of unofficial forces: humanitarians determined to end slavery and spread Christianity; merchants eager for trade, however small its total volume; and individual Britons who followed their own burning stars of imperial destiny.

British influence in the Gold Coast followed this pattern. Forts controlled by Britain's African Company of Merchants, scattered among others belonging to the Dutch and Danes, were built to protect trade, not to serve as footholds for territorial aggrandizement.

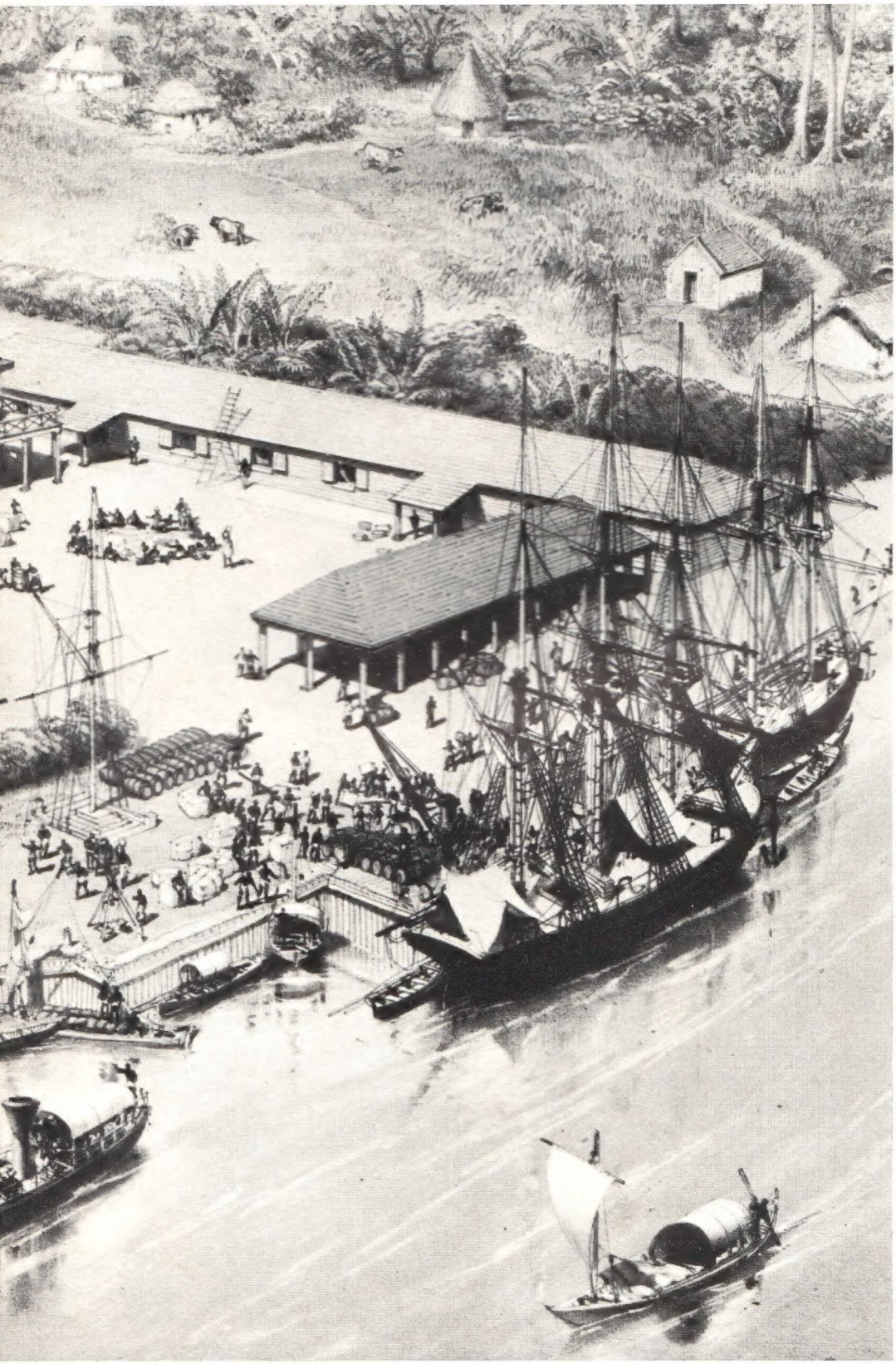
During the 18th Century two nations of a strength and political complexity uncommon to Africa developed there. Closest to the seaboard, and most heavily engaged in commerce with the Europeans, were the allied Fante tribes. Further inland, almost unknown to the white men, was Ashanti, a great African empire with a tradition of fierce militarism and, as the British would learn, a finely developed skill in exercising it.

The first glimpse of this startling power came in 1806 when an Ashanti army swarmed down to the coast and slaughtered 8,000 Fante under the very walls of Fort William. "Heaps of dead encumbered the beach in every direction," wrote an astounded English witness, "and the sands were red with blood."

Recurring warfare between Fante and

continued on p. 1098

In the stifling heat of a British trading-post on the Sherbro River, Sierra Leone, natives load ships



with palm oil and other goods that had replaced the traditional African merchandise: slaves.

This Sierra Leone woman selling provisions advertised her wares with a cry whose closest rendering was "Buy my foo' foo'."

Ashanti made a shambles of the African Company's commerce, already hurting from the abolition of the slave-trade in 1807. In 1817 the Company sent four Europeans to negotiate with the Asantehene, the King of all Ashanti. They returned from Kumasi with such an amazing report – of a metropolis with broad avenues, of 30,000 parading warriors, of nobles so heavily festooned with gold that they had to rest their weighted arms upon the heads of servants – that the British public refused to believe it. They also brought back a treaty which the Company did not bother to honour. Fighting continued.

By 1821 the Gold Coast situation had so deteriorated that the government abolished the Company and took control. The new Governor, Sir Charles Macarthy, was a tall, bearded man who enjoyed parading in full ceremonial regalia before admiring Africans. He had an imposing manner and intended to impose it on the Ashanti, whose war-making talents, he was convinced, had been much overrated. Wearing a plumed hat and riding in a carriage drawn by six Africans, Macarthy set out to discipline the haughty savages.

He met the enemy on January 22, 1824, on the banks of the Bonsa River. They were unseen, but the sound of their drums and horns indicated an army of 10,000. He had only 500 men, but was convinced most of the Ashanti were just waiting for a chance to defect, and to this end ordered his band to play "God Save the King." There came back the discordant strains of an Ashanti war-hymn. Again the band played the British anthem, while Macarthy and his officers, resplendent in blue and scarlet uniforms, stood at attention.

After several rounds of this peculiar musical debate the Ashanti came – shooting, not defecting. What ensued was more mêlée than battle, at the height of which a storesman arrived from the coast bringing – so it was thought – more ammunition. Eagerly opened by the hard-pressed troops, the cases were found to contain biscuits. Macarthy said he would have the man hanged, but the Ashanti saved him the trouble by killing both of them as they overran the British position. Sir Charles's head was carried in triumph to Kumasi. Thereafter, once a year, it was borne ceremoniously through the streets of the capital as one of the main attractions at the Festival of Yams.

By 1828 Whitehall was so weary of the Gold Coast problem that it prepared to demolish the forts and evacuate the merchants. When the businessmen protested, the government agreed to hand the administration over to the merchants.

Captain George Maclean, the merchants' new Governor, concluded treaties with both Ashanti and Fante and settled the chaos in which the country had been immersed for a quarter of a century. His fearlessness and fairness won respect from the Africans. Once, when a chief offered a reward for his head, Maclean walked into the village with only a corporal's guard and walked out with a treaty promising the chief's submission. Africans brought him their disputes to be settled, and his jurisdiction extended far beyond what the British government wished. He established what amounted to a British protectorate from the coast to the Ashanti frontier.

After 13 successful years, Maclean's administration ended with a personal tragedy. He married a popular, 36-year-old writer of romantic fiction and poetry, Letitia Elizabeth Landon. She found neither the Gold Coast nor her husband as romantic as she expected. The Governor frequently deserted the marriage-bed for the readily available nocturnal pleasures of Cape Coast.

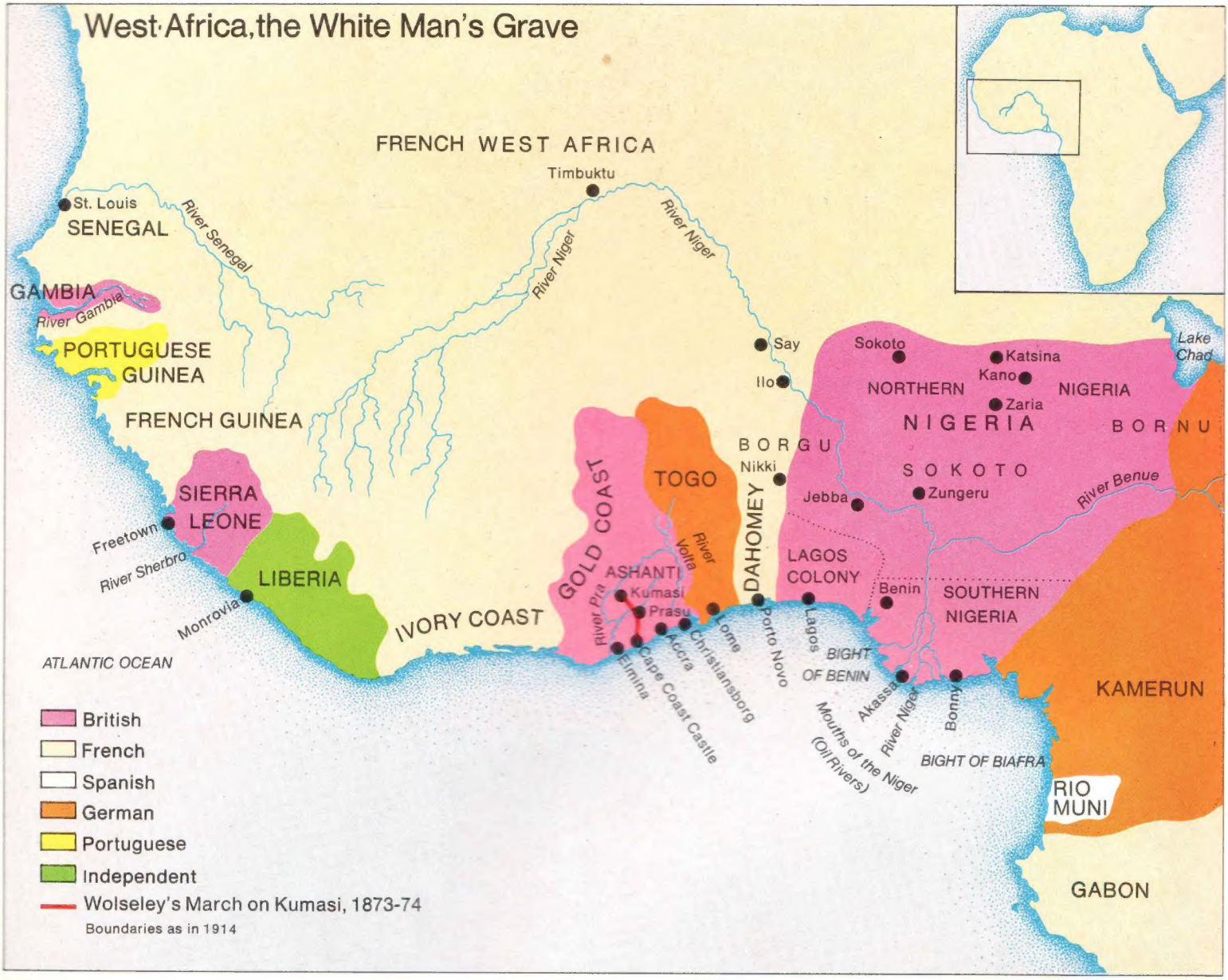
After four months of reality, the writer of romance was found dead beside an empty prussic acid bottle. Her fans stirred rumours that Maclean's jealous "country wife" had murdered the Englishwoman. His enemies began questioning his official conduct. A special Colonial Office report praised his work, but the incident resulted none the less in the Crown resuming control of the Gold Coast.

Maclean's achievements were vindicated when the new royal Governor signed an agreement with Fante chiefs known as the "Bond of 1844." It legalized his informal "protectorate," although it theoretically left the Africans independent. In 1850 Great Britain bought out the Danish holdings and 20 years later those of the Dutch. Gradually, the Gold Coast was becoming part of the British Empire.

Not, however, as far as the proud

The map on the right shows Britain's holdings in West Africa – Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and, farther round to the north, Gambia – after the European scramble for colonies in the late 19th Century. Ignoring the threats of disease and death, white men had pressed inland, calling their respective governments after them till Liberia remained the only independent country in the area.

Sir Garnet Wolseley, victor over the Ashanti, is pictured as a romantic imperial hero.



Ashanti were concerned. In 1862 they again crossed the Pra River and twice defeated British-led armies. An expedition sent to punish them returned without having met the enemy and decimated by dysentery, inspiring the Asantehene to remark that "the white man brings his cannon to the bush, but the bush is stronger than the cannon."

This débâcle led to a House of Commons Select Committee report in 1865 which declared that all further extensions of territory, or new treaties with native tribes, "would be inexpedient," and urged eventual withdrawal from almost all West African commitments. The public approved and the government promptly adopted this policy. If imperialists, these Victorians were reluctant ones.

There was not even that much from which to withdraw. The Gambia was a narrow strip of riverside holdings; the British Negroes of Sierra Leone – freed slaves – huddled close to the coast and Freetown; and in what is now Nigeria only Lagos was British territory.

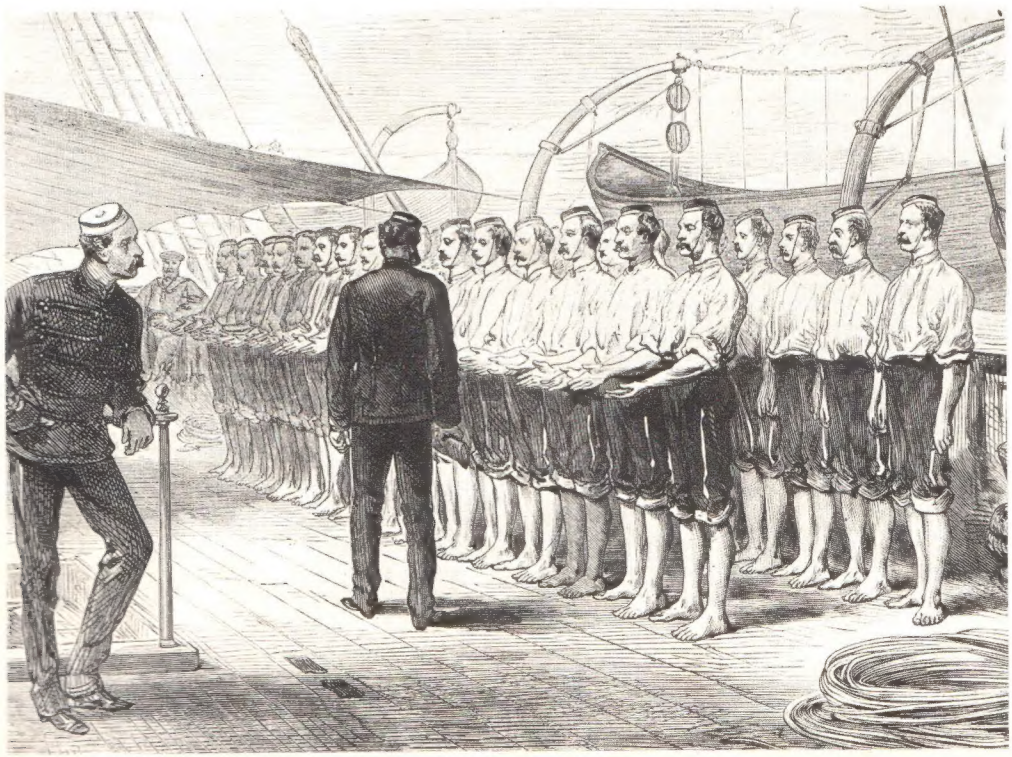
Naturally, the new policy was interpreted by Gold Coast chiefs as a sign of British weakness, a fact which helped to ensure that it would never work. Britain either had to be involved or get out, and whatever the politicians in London said, there were Englishmen on the spot who were determined to stay.

In 1867 a new Asantehene acceded to the sacred Golden Stool of Ashanti. His name was Kofi Karikari, but before long he was to be known throughout Britain's nurseries as "King Coffee," the most terrifying and therefore useful bogyman in the Victorian nanny's repertoire. Mere mentions of his ferocity sent a whole generation of English children shivering to their beds. "My business," he is supposed to have said on taking power, "shall be war."

When in 1872 the Dutch ceded to Britain territories that he considered to belong to Ashanti, King Coffee drained a toast to victory from the skull of Sir Charles Macarthy and sent his armies across the Pra. The British government grudgingly accepted that unless it was to abandon its protectorate, it would have to subdue the Ashanti, and they were crushed in a swift little campaign led by the brilliant Sir Garnet Wolseley.

THE ASHANTI WAR

In 1873, for the sixth time in 70 years, British troops set out to quell the aggressive, expansionist Ashanti of the Gold Coast. In the previous century this warrior-nation had extended its harsh, slave-based rule southward from its land-locked forest homeland to the European-dominated coast. In 1824, the Ashanti destroyed a British force under Sir Charles Macarthy, and took his skull back to their capital, Kumasi, as a royal drinking-cup – a humiliation the British had not avenged. When the Dutch sold Britain Elmina Castle, long coveted by the Ashanti as a slave emporium, war flared again. Early in 1873, Sir Garnet Wolseley, a specialist in colonial war, was dispatched to crush the Ashanti. His task was to achieve victory inside two months, before the March rains made the fever-ridden forests almost impassable.



British troops on their way to fight the Ashanti parade for a hands and feet inspection.

Soldiers, journalists and African passengers re

en route for the Gold Coast. Among the correspondents was H.M.Stanley, recently returned from his legendary meeting with Dr. Livingstone.

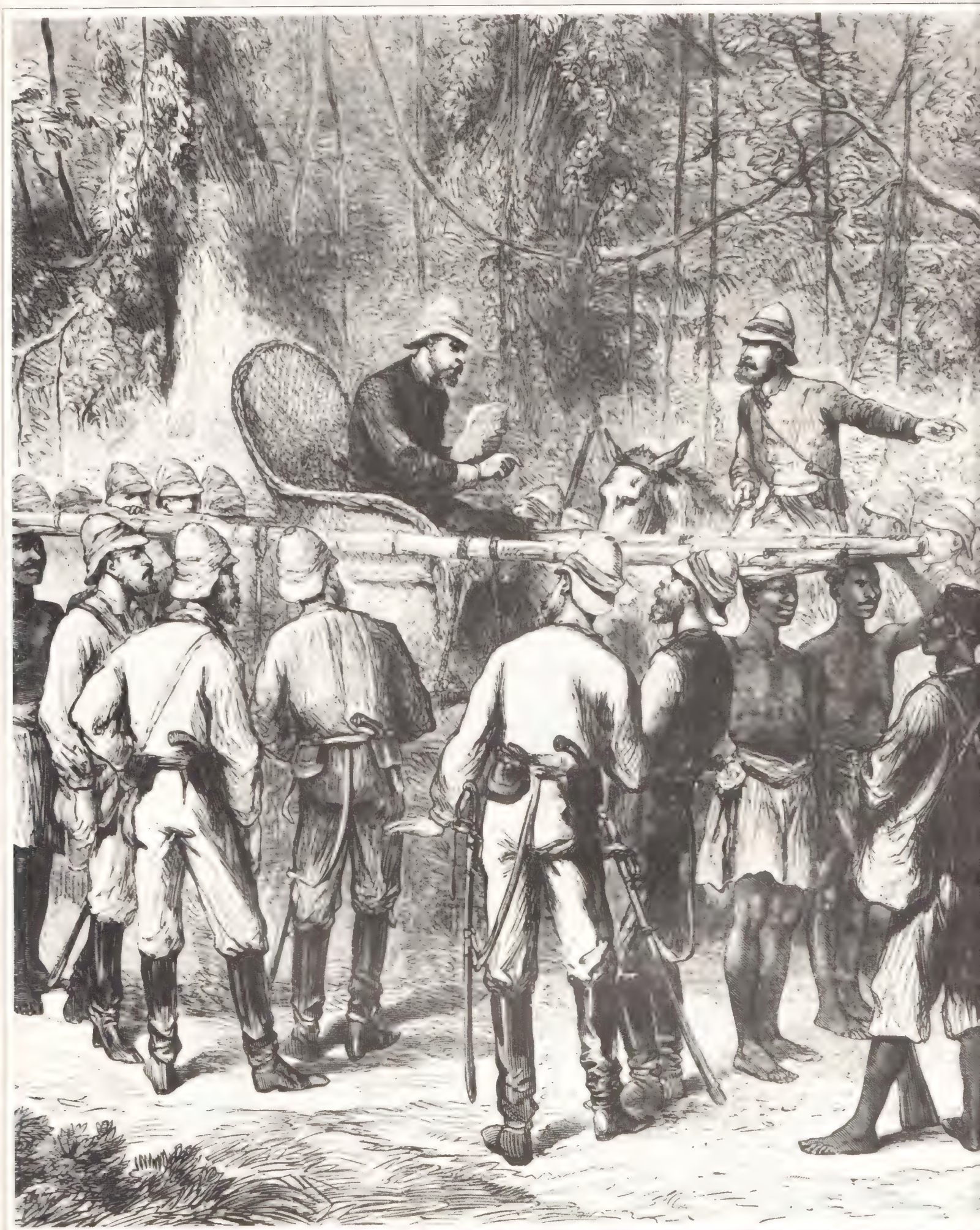
Mounting the Campaign

Originally Wolseley's command consisted of African and West Indian troops scraped together for the campaign. But Wolseley insisted that this force would stand little chance against the Ashanti without a stiffening of regulars. And as a veteran of numerous colonial wars in which he had shown great daring and ingenuity, the general was not a man to ignore.

On the understanding that the regulars would quickly be whisked away from the deadly malarial lowlands, the government grudgingly sent small units of the Black Watch, Rifle Brigade and Royal Welch Fusiliers who landed at Cape Coast Castle on January 1, 1874. During the time that these troops were *en route* to the Gold Coast, Wolseley had not only cleared a road north for them but had built supply-bases all along it.

Native women of Cape Coast Castle, recruited as porters for the locally raised transport corps, march out to provision the bases on the line of march.

There was no harbour at Cape Coast Castle, so British regulars had to be ferried ashore in surf boats through enormous breakers.



Sir Garnet Wolseley advances to war in a chair borne by four natives. "All other pleasures pale," he once wrote "before the intense, the maddening

delight of leading men into the midst of an enemy."

Jungle Victory

Heavily dosed with quinine, Wolseley's force, reinforced with a naval contingent, marched north through the jungle. Some 70 miles up-country was the welcome forward base at Prasu, where troops could briefly rest. Then, after crossing the Pra River, the advance on Kumasi continued. Spies had reported to Wolseley that the enemy would stand and fight in dense bush at Amoafu 20 miles south of the capital and there his 2,200-man force found the Ashanti army on January 31.

The battle was soon over. The reckless bravery and antiquated muskets of the Africans were no match for the disciplined fire-power of Wolseley's British square. Hundreds of Ashanti fell, including three of their greatest chiefs. The survivors turned and fled. But victory posed a dilemma for Wolseley. Was he to play safe and wait for his trailing supply column or sweep on to Kumasi immediately?

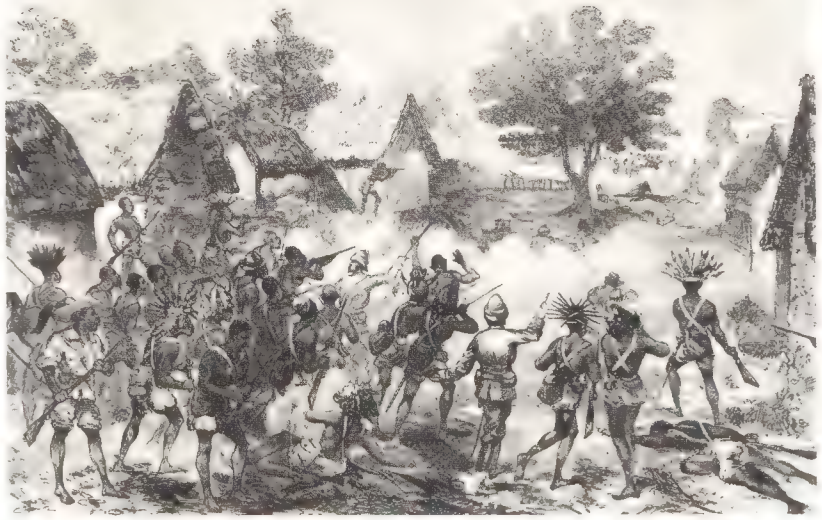
Soldiers and bluejackets sharpen cutlasses at Prasu, the well-equipped forward base whose hospital, magazine, battery, canteen and post-office gave logistic support to the campaign.

Native labourers build the road to Kumasi. When finished, it included 237 bridges.

A Stench of Blood

Wolseley weighed the risks involved in outrunning his supplies and then sent his men racing towards Kumasi. With pipes skirling the Black Watch swept all before them and on February 5, 1874, led the way into the capital. To Wolseley's amazement the Ashanti appeared in no hurry to leave Kumasi. While his men formed up and gave three cheers for Queen Victoria, yesterday's opponents crowded round and even shook British troops by the hand.

The capital stank of blood. Near the palace, appalled soldiers stumbled on the remains of several thousand sacrificial victims, a sight that made Wolseley sick. Short of supplies and fearing the approach of the rains he set the city ablaze and pulled out for the coast with as much of the royal jewellery as he could collect.



Lord Gifford and his native scouts precede the main British column, gathering intelligence and storming village after village.

The bones of scores of human sacrifices litter a grove in Kumasi. The victims had been executed in an attempt to propitiate angry gods and forestall Wolseley's advance.

The Rewards of Victory

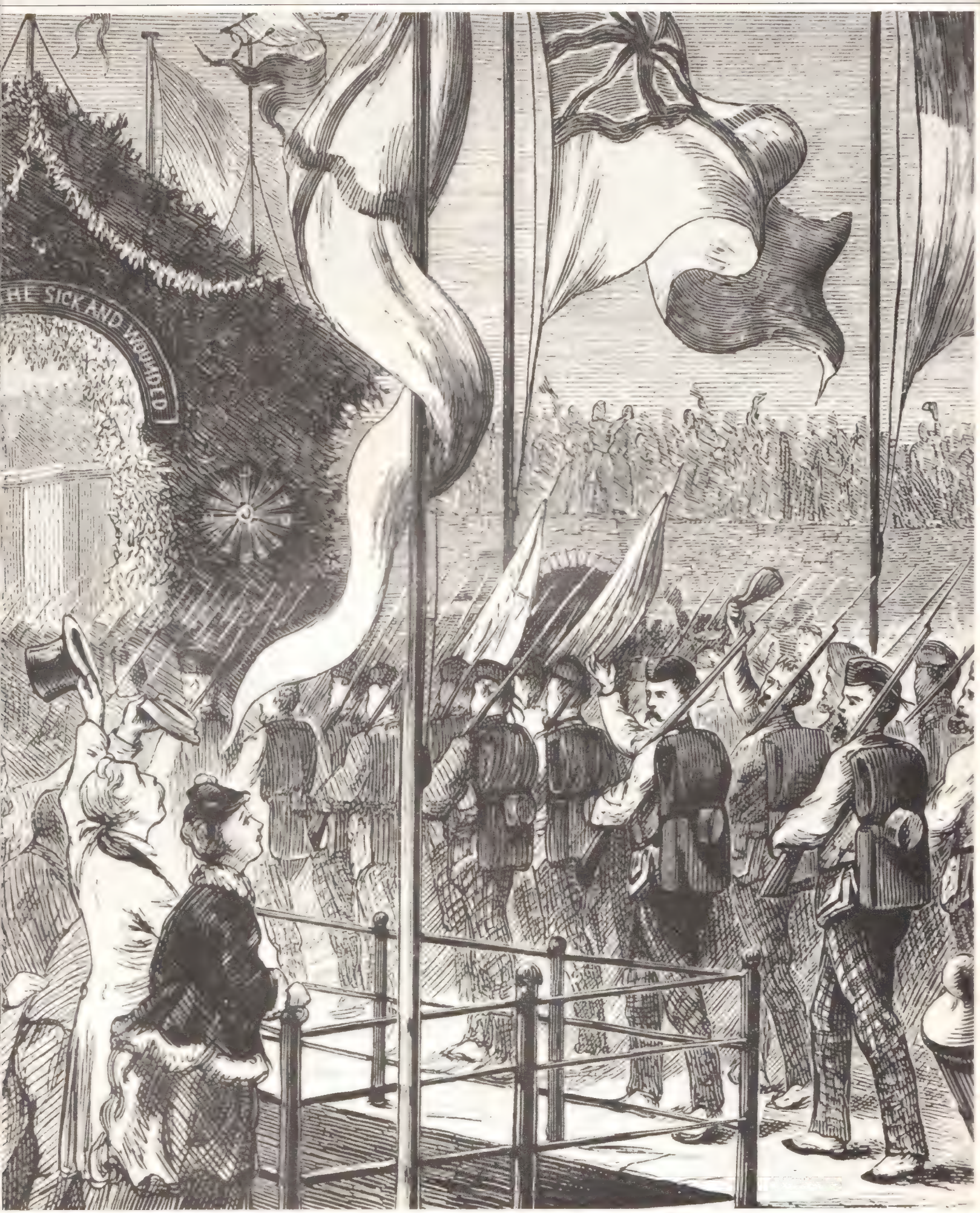
As the army gladly tramped away from the horrors of Kumasi, Ashanti messengers rushed up with peace proposals: an offer to renounce claims to Elmina and pay an indemnity of 50,000 ounces of gold. "So," wrote Wolseley, "ended the most horrible war I ever took part in."

His triumph was overwhelming. He had created a field force out of highly disparate units; fed it with an ingeniously improvised supply system; led it to victory through deep jungle; and got it safely back before the onset of the torrential rains. In later years some military men belittled his achievements as the inevitable outcome of a contest between the British Army and primitive savages. But faultfinders were few at the moment of victory. Parliament voted Wolseley a gift of £25,000; the Queen personally decorated him; and the troops were welcomed home with balls and banquets.

As soon as the army returned to Cape Coast the sick and wounded were put aboard boats and taken out to the three hospital ships which lay offshore to receive them.

The critically ill are attended in hospitals at near-by Ascension and the Cape Verde islands.

Troops like the Black Watch, seen here returning



to Portsmouth after the Ashanti War, received a delirious welcome as they marched through into town under a triumphal arch.

II. The Taming of the Interior

After the 1874 War, the Ashanti nation rebuilt itself. A new Asantehene renewed his claims on some of the vassal states freed by the British. Payments on the indemnity imposed by Wolseley lapsed and were forgotten. Britain at first left well enough alone, but then began to fear France or Germany might sidle into the country.

Gold Coast Governor William Maxwell decided to settle the Ashanti problem once and for all. In 1896 he went to Kumasi with an army, forced the Ashanti to accept British "protection," and for security kidnapped the Asantehene, most of the royal family, and some chiefs.

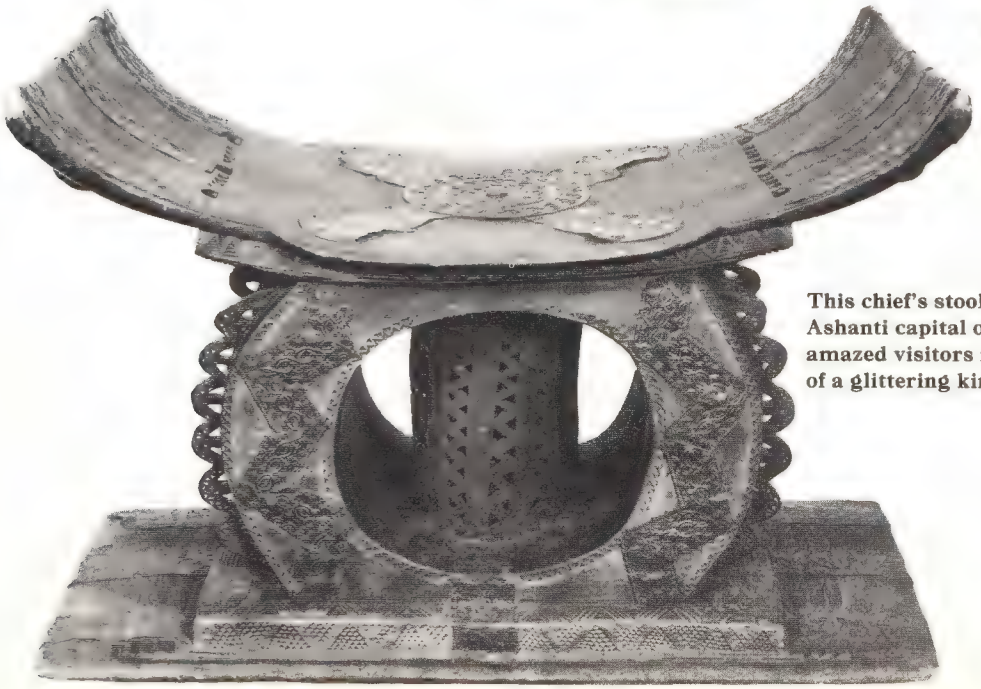
As might be expected, it did not work. The Ashanti had lost their Asantehene, but they had saved, by hiding it, the very soul of their nation: the Golden Stool. This important and valuable object proved an irresistible attraction to a later Governor, Frederic Hodgson, and led to the last Ashanti War.

Hodgson wanted the fabled stool. He went to Kumasi in March, 1900 and demanded it. "Where is the Golden Stool?" he asked the assembled chiefs. "Why am I not sitting on the Golden Stool at this moment? I am the representative of the paramount power. Why have you relegated me to this chair?" In addition to arrogance, he was displaying a woeful ignorance of Ashanti custom. No one, not the Asantehene himself, actually *sat* on the soul of the Ashanti nation. In fact, the Golden Stool had a stool of its own, on which it was placed for major state occasions.

Oblivious to the resentful murmur of the crowd, Hodgson sent a Captain Armitage into the bush to look for the stool. Finding his party surrounded by angry warriors, and thinking a show of British phlegm to be the appropriate response, Armitage ordered tea served. The Ashantis lifted their guns and blasted tea from the table. By the time Armitage fought his way back to the British fort in Kumasi, it was surrounded. It was the start of a long siege.

There were, by June, 750 African soldiers and 29 Europeans inside the fort, each subsisting on a lump of tinned corned beef and one biscuit a day. Lady Hodgson, who had been "not a little proud" to be the first Englishwoman in Kumasi, tried to sustain morale with loo and solo whist parties. Deaths from starvation

In the loot from Kumasi, there were warhelmets, like this, that reinforced British awe of the ferocious Ashanti of the Gold Coast and made "Coomassie" one of the proudest decorations a British soldier could wear.



This chief's stool, brought back from the Ashanti capital of Kumasi by the first amazed visitors in 1817, provided evidence of a glittering kingdom in the bush.

and smallpox rose to 30 a day, or, as a Dr. Chalmers put it with a statistical turn of humour, "3,869 per 1,000 per annum." The unnerving effects of Ashanti drums and war-chants were countered by a gramophone record of "Rule Britannia" played until it was so worn that one defender, hearing it, rushed to his action station thinking it was an attack.

Despairing of help arriving from neighbouring Nigeria in time, Hodgson gambled on an escape. He left behind the wounded, a small force of able-bodied men, and enough food to last them 23 days. On June 23 the others slipped out of a side gate and ran for the bush. All day long they fought off Ashanti attacks.

The British abandoned their luggage along the way, which probably saved them, since the 1,500 Ashantis in pursuit stopped to loot it. After three days and the loss of 74 men they reached safety.

In Kumasi, meanwhile, the gates were opened each morning and evening so that the newly dead could be rolled out. No one had the strength to bury them. Some men, too weak to queue for rations, were fed where they lay. They made plans for when the food ran out: they were going to spike the guns and give those who could move the chance to break for it.

But on July 14 the besieged force thought they heard distant cannon. They received no answer when they fired three double shells into the sky as a signal, but at about 4.30 the next afternoon "terrific firing" was heard behind the Ashanti lines. The three Englishmen in the fort opened a bottle of champagne, "one of our few remaining medical comforts," and climbed to the look-outs. At 6 p.m. they saw a fox-terrier scamper from the bush.

The commander of the relieving force, James Willcocks, smashing through a ring of Ashanti stockades, was not sure he had arrived in time until a bugle from within the fort sounded "welcome." His West African Frontier Force spent the next three months putting down an Ashanti guerrilla campaign and destroying the stockades. It was December before he was able to return to Nigeria.

In January, 1902, Ashanti was finally and formally annexed to the British Empire as a Crown Colony. Nothing more was heard of the Golden Stool until 1920, when it was uncovered by men building a new road. It was returned to Kumasi. British authorities, need it be said, this time made no attempt to confiscate it.

This ornament, made of wood and liberally swathed in gold-leaf, fitted on to the ferrule of an Ashanti chief's umbrella.

A hide cap decorated in gold reflects the Ashantis' love of rich personal adornments.

In Nigeria, as in the Gold Coast, businessmen had made British influence a fact before the officials of Empire confirmed it. Before 1807, Liverpool merchant houses grew rich buying, shipping, and selling human merchandise from the Niger region to the New World. After slave-trading was made illegal, they kept their businesses going on a new European social phenomenon. Suddenly after centuries of stifling body smells with strong scent – bathing was a last resort – Europe had a passion for being clean. The Niger Delta's exports of palm oil, a prime ingredient in soap, escalated from 150 tons a year in 1806 to more than 30,000 tons a year in the 1870s.

British traders, fearing the fever-infested mangrove swamps, stayed at the mouths of the Oil Rivers (actually the Niger's outlets to the sea) dealing with African middlemen who in turn traded with tribes further inland. After quinine's blessings were revealed, some companies tried running steamboats up the Niger to trade directly with the interior.

The "palm-oil ruffians" of the coast, Liverpool traders and Africans alike, worried about losing their livelihoods as middlemen. Steamers were bombarded with cannon from the riverbanks and trading-stations were attacked. The need to run Royal Naval gunboats up the river to quell these disturbances increased the British government's antipathy towards political involvement in the area.

The palm tree on this trader's card drew palm-oil traders to British West Africa.

Lagos became a colony because an intractable local ruler defied the ban on slave-trading, but acquiring territory and administrative responsibility was definitely not part of Britain's policy.

The man who eventually coerced the guardians of Empire to make Nigeria British was Sir George Taubman Goldie. He was a businessman, but, like Cecil Rhodes, had imperial ambitions that could not be measured by any yardstick of personal profit. "My dream, as a child," he said, "was to colour the map red."

Goldie's background was more likely to raise Victorian eyebrows than to qualify him for any conventional service to Empire. He studied at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, but confessed he was "blind drunk" when he passed his examination and was as explosive as "a gun powder magazine." Two years later he inherited a fortune and bolted the Army without sending in his papers. He went to Egypt where he fell in love with an Arab girl and took her to the Sudan where they shared a "Garden of Allah" for three years until he tired of her.

Returning home to a "life of idleness and dissipation," he became enamoured of the family governess. When Goldie took his paramour to Paris in 1870, they were trapped there by the besieging Prussians, victors of the Franco-Prussian War. Irretrievably "compromised," they had to marry on return to England.

It was probably with a sigh of relief that his family packed him off to Nigeria in 1875 to sort out the difficulties of a company in which they owned an interest. Not yet 30, he had enough acumen to see the problem: too much competition. He solved it by inducing rival firms to join in forming the United African Company. White traders could then present a solid front and deal with Africans on a take-it-or-leave-it basis.

While Goldie was absorbing his rivals, a new challenger entered the arena. France's government, which did not share Whitehall's loathing for West Africa, was acquiring colonies, seeking treaties with African states, and encouraging French private enterprise to move in on British merchants' territory. By 1882, there were 17 French trading-stations on the reaches of the Upper Niger which Goldie liked to think of as his own.

Frederick Lugard, the "Father of Nigeria," rose from a roving military commander to become the first Governor of the colony.

Goldie thought the way to protect the Niger was to give his company a royal charter. The government was cool to the idea, but he prepared for it anyway, reforming into the National African Company, issuing more stock than the company was worth to make its capital appear more substantial, and enlisting peers and politicians for the board.

Before the world's big powers met in Berlin in 1884 to fix African spheres of influence, Goldie regularly traded at a loss to force competing French firms to sell out to him. He succeeded. Because, as he said, Britain was "now alone on the Niger," France and Germany had to agree to British control of that area. And now that Britain had administrative responsibility which neither the Foreign nor Colonial Office wanted to pay for, Goldie got his charter. His company became the Royal Niger Company.

The river was supposed to be open to anyone, but the company used its quasi-governmental powers to charge fees and duties that effectually stopped all trade but its own on the Upper Niger. When "legal" methods failed, others were employed. An agent of a Liverpool merchant was beaten up for operating in the company's territory and the town he traded with was blockaded.

The government tried to ignore the company's transgressions. It did not wish to pay for running the region itself, and it was pleased that Goldie's agents were making treaties that brought such states as Sokoto and Gwandu into the British sphere, thus frustrating the French.

That was the hope, anyway. Arguments about who owned what in the hinterlands were raging and would continue until the turn of the century. Lord Salisbury, Foreign Secretary, summed up these disputes nicely, if perhaps too honestly for the comfort of his diplomats, after an 1890 agreement with France: "We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's foot has ever trod; we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where the mountains and rivers and lakes were."

Sometimes these contests shifted dramatically from conference-table maps to the ground itself where men, not pencils, drew the lines, and force, or threat of force, settled the issue. In 1894 attention focused on Nikki, a remote town on the western fringe of the Royal Niger Company's vaguely defined territory.

France said the King of Nikki, not other chieftains with whom the company had treaties, was the true ruler of Borgu, a large province of the Upper Niger. Before long French, English and German expeditions were on their way to Nikki. It was, said the French Press, "a veritable steeplechase." At the head of the British party was Frederick Lugard.

If any white man looms larger in Nigeria's history than George Goldie, it is Lugard. He was already famous for his work in East Africa, where he had infuriated the French by leading Britain's intervention in Uganda's religious wars.

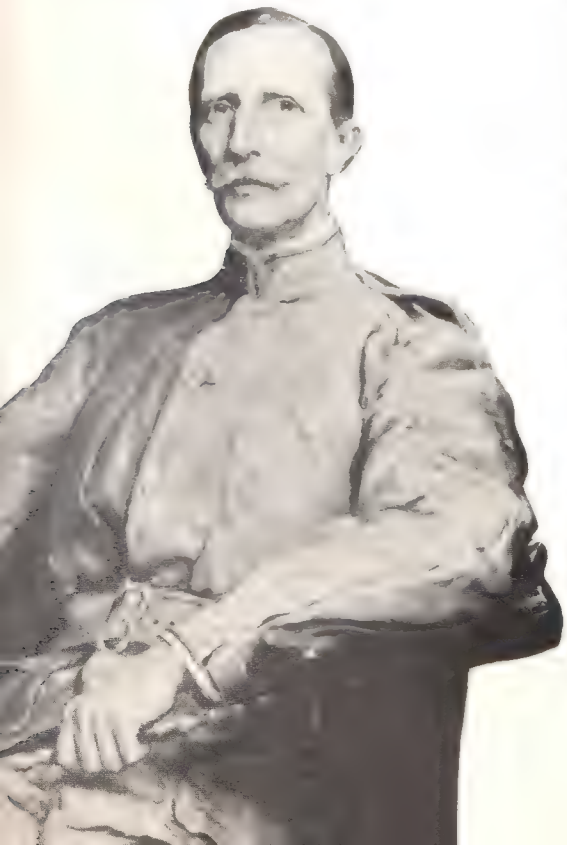
Lugard hated West Africa, but he was apparently well suited for its rigours. In a surprise attack by marauding tribesmen near Nikki an arrow pierced his sunhelmet and lodged in his head. His men dragged him about the ground by the arrow in their attempts to pull it out, until someone braced his feet on Lugard's shoulders. The arrow – which was extracted with a sizeable piece of his skull attached – was poisoned. He chewed some antidotal roots, led a successful counter-attack, and marched 13 more miles before calling it a day.

At Nikki, the King, who thought he would die if he looked on a white man, refused to see him personally. He sent his oral approval of the treaty which was signed by Nikki's other high-ranking officials. Sixteen days after the British left, the French arrived. Lugard had won the race, but the row had just begun.

The French denied the validity of Lugard's treaty and produced one signed by the King. Britain said that France – which sent 300 soldiers to Nikki, compared to Lugard's 40 – had obtained her treaty by force. Instead of waiting idly while the matter was debated, France began occupying the area claimed. In 1895 the French boldly built a fort near the company's station at Jebba. Their intrusions worried Goldie, but his slender military resources were committed to other problems at that moment.

One was the Brassmen of the Niger Coast Protectorate. Distressed by the company's Upper Niger monopoly, which denied them their traditional sources of palm oil, the starving people of Brass finally struck at their tormentor. In January, 1895, they raided the company's port of Akassa, killed many of its employees, and – dramatically indicating how thin was the area's veneer of British civilization – ate 43 of them. Goldie was stunned. "We always looked on Akassa," he said, "as being as safe as Piccadilly."

In a letter to the Prince of Wales the Brassmen said they were sorry for the raid, "particularly in the *killing* and *eating* of [the] employees," and asked mercy from "the *good, old Queen*, knowing *her* to be a most kind, *tender hearted*, and sympathetic old *mother*."



Georgie Goldie, founder of the Royal Niger Company, was an archetypal Victorian adventurer who created a trading empire in the area that was later to become Nigeria.

Cannibalism notwithstanding, the plight of the Brassmen engendered sympathy in England and increased public animosity towards the company, which was already being attacked for its vigour in suppressing competition and its want of the same zeal in suppressing slavery. In response, Goldie felt compelled to take military action against Nupe and Ilorin, two slave-trading emirates in the south of his domain, while company troops were still needed at Akassa to guard against further Brass attacks.

While he was fighting – and roundly beating – the emirs, France continued expansion along the Niger, arguing that occupation was the test of ownership. The British government began to realize its interests needed more protection than a private company could provide. In 1897, Joseph Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary, asked Lugard to organize and command a small army that would "go anywhere and do anything." The first thing he wanted it to do was to winkle the French out of Borgu without actually fighting.

Under Chamberlain's "chessboard policy," Lugard was to match the French detachment for detachment, occupying a village next to each one of theirs. Lugard did not like this "impossible and mad" policy – he thought it would lead to a shooting war – but he took the job and organized the army of 3,000 men. He set an old friend, James Willcocks, in command. In May 1898, Willcocks led the new West African Frontier Force into French-infested territory.

The weird campaign had its comic-opera aspects. Where Willcocks first hoisted the Union Jack a French N.C.O. arrived with 12 Senegalese soldiers and raised the tricolour. The two Europeans ceremoniously saluted each other's flag and then began arguing. But the deadly serious nature of the confrontation soon became apparent. At one village Willcocks's men physically pushed their way through a barrier of armed Senegalese soldiers. At another, French troops with fixed bayonets followed the British for a mile, cursing and spitting at them.

Fearing that an incident on the Niger might plunge Europe into an Anglo-French war – just what Chamberlain wanted them to think – the French finally yielded at the conference table.

The Anglo-French agreement of 1898 did not give Britain as much of West Africa as she claimed, but more than she would have had without Chamberlain's daring tactics. In Gambia, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast, her territory was restricted or reduced. In Nigeria, she was pushed down the Niger from Say to Ilo, giving France what she wanted, a station on the navigable river below the rapids. And the French got Nikki after all.

But Britain kept the richest part of Borgu, and won recognition of her claims to the northern provinces of Sokoto and Bornu. Considering how little the Royal Niger Company had actually occupied – almost nothing away from the river – the settlement was a victory for the English.

Before this – some said as a concession to the French to get the agreement – the government had decided to take over the Royal Niger Company's territory. Goldie would not admit his company had defaulted on its obligations, but acknowledged, with characteristically exquisite cynicism, the logic of the step. "An Imperial administration may steal a horse," he said, "while a chartered company may not look over a hedge."

The company was generously compensated. But Goldie's friends said his enemies denied him adequate recognition for his work. He was offered no great honours, and even after he died, alone in a hotel off Piccadilly in 1925, objections were unsuccessfully raised to the epitaph chosen for his grave in Brompton Cemetery: "Founder of Nigeria."

Lugard was named High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria (the name of the Niger Coast Protectorate was changed to Southern Nigeria). The million square miles he took over on January 1, 1900, was mostly unexplored. Here were places where the wheel was unknown and others where old and sophisticated civilizations thrived in great walled cities. As his biographer, Margery Perham, put it: "The vast majority of the inhabitants were not only completely unaware that they had been allocated to Britain, but were ignorant of [its] very existence."

Lugard's task in bringing Nigeria the benefits of Empire, and Empire the benefits of Nigeria, would be a colossal one. He was eager to begin. But three months after he took over, his primary means of extending British presence and imposing British order, the West African Frontier Force, was suddenly called for emergency duty to the Gold Coast, where the Ashanti had risen again.

Until his troops returned from the Gold Coast, Sir Frederick Lugard – he received his knighthood in 1901 – could do little more than sit in his two-roomed headquarters at Zungeru and plan. Much planning was necessary. Only a tenth of Northern Nigeria was under some semblance of British control. The rest was subject to an older and harsher rule, that of the slave-raiders. "There is probably no part of the 'Dark Continent'," he wrote, "in which the worst forms of slave raiding still exist to so terrible an extent."

The Fulani, a proud and intelligent people afire with Islam and a worldly drive for power, had fed both passions with a *jihad*, or Holy War, against the pagan Hausas. They conquered much of Hausaland and harvested a rich crop of slaves. The practice was as economically destructive as it was personally tragic. Raids transformed productive areas into wastelands of empty villages. And the Fulani raiders were moving south as the British moved north. A clash was becoming inevitable.

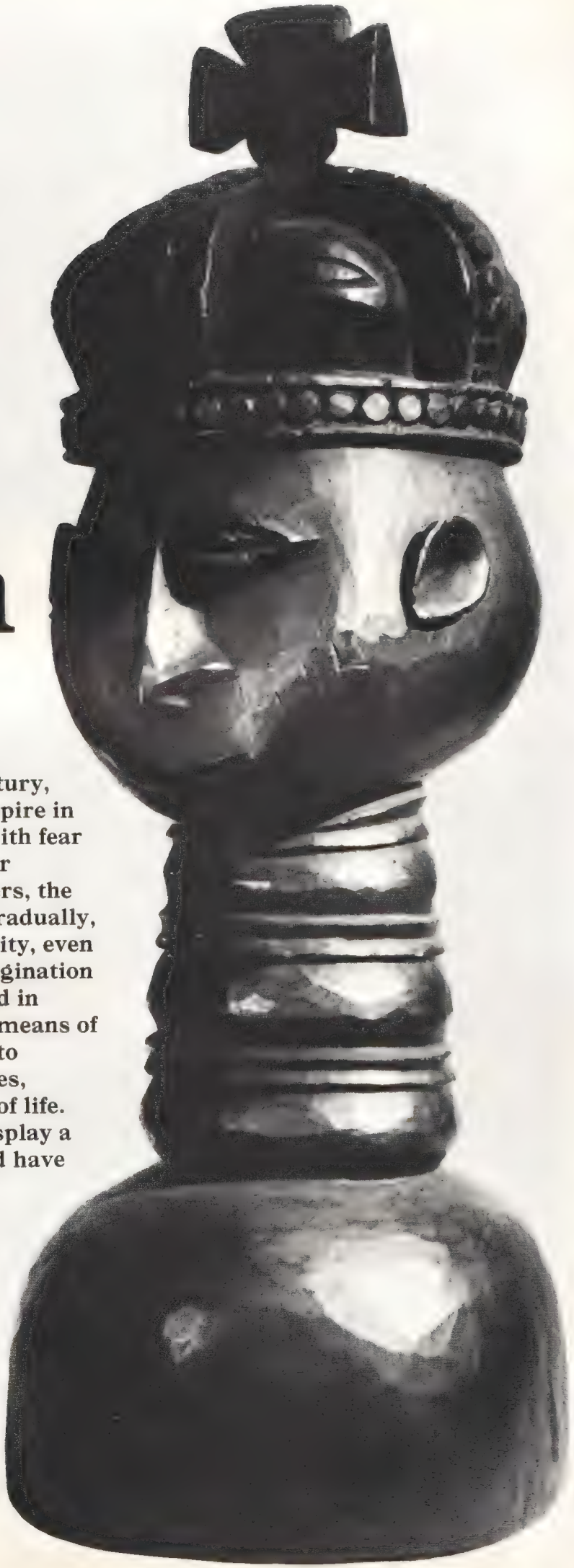
Lugard drew a distinction, which some of his critics at home did not, between slave-raiding and the institution of slavery itself. The latter, if no less evil, was perhaps less appalling, and at any rate was so basic to the social and economic structure that it could not be eliminated at a stroke. He forbade the creation of new slaves, but did not try to free existing ones immediately, believing that such a decree would either be ignored or would cause a breakdown of order.

His most difficult job was to bring into line the Fulani city-state of Kano and the emirates of Sokoto and Gwandu. As usual, the Colonial Office did not want him to do anything expensive, expressing the hope that "Col. Lugard will be able to obtain a personal ascendancy which will prevent the necessity for strong measures." Chamberlain, wary of adverse home opinion, put it bluntly: "We must not have another native war."

But when Lugard tried the prescribed soft line on the Sultan of Sokoto the rebuff was unqualified: "I will never agree with you. Between us and you there are no dealings except as between Mussulmans and Unbelievers: War, as God Almighty has enjoined on us"

Through African Eyes

Towards the end of the 19th Century, as the British extended their Empire in Africa, the inhabitants reacted with fear and suspicion. They could neither understand nor escape the soldiers, the officials and the missionaries. Gradually, however, fear gave way to curiosity, even amusement. Before long the imagination of native artists was aroused, and in wood-carvings – their principal means of artistic expression – they began to caricature the white man's clothes, attitudes, possessions and ways of life. The statuettes on these pages display a pungent exaggeration that would have delighted political cartoonists then at work back in Europe.



An African carving of Queen Victoria adroitly emphasizes the Great White Queen's puffy eyes, sharp nose and grumpy mouth.

Horniman Museum

A clergyman and his miniature replica: a pupil.

The Critical Glance

Though often thought of by Victorians only as an inexpert producer of grotesque face-masks and images of demons, the African wood-carver was a fine craftsman. Using a large knife or axe to rough a shape from a block of wood, then carving in the details with adzes, chisels and gouges, he would finally obtain a smooth finish by rubbing the work with rough leaves or the skins of a tough-scaled fish.

African artists relied more on artistic insight than an exact representation of reality, and so they did not use "sitting" models. They preferred to rely on memory and imagination to emphasize the salient characteristics of their subjects: the domineering stance of an autocratic merchant, the worried look of a hard-working official, the austerity of a self-righteous teacher, or the gruffness of an officer.

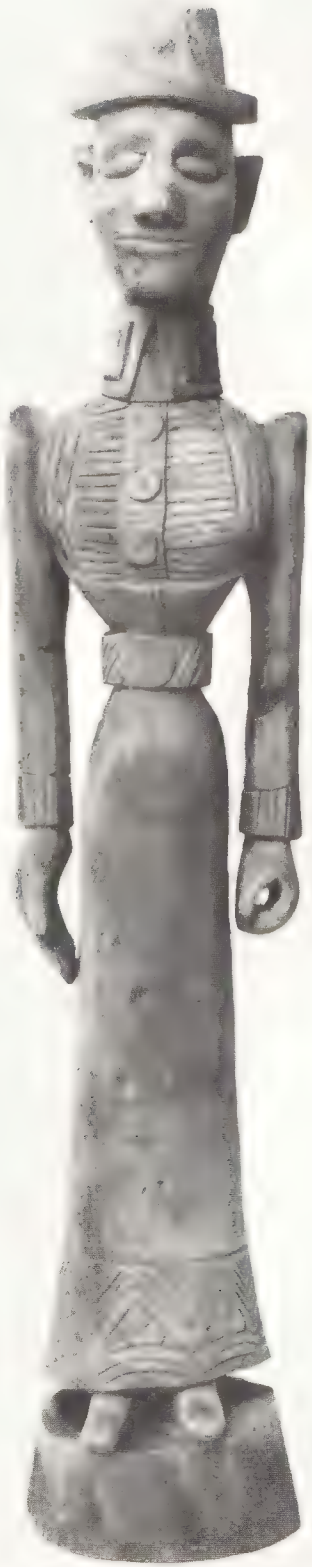
A missionary's blonde wife and son.

A vast cavalry officer, dwarfing his horse.

An imperious merchant.

A prim teacher.

A worried-looking District Officer.



An austere, wasp-waisted schoolmistress.

A harried off-duty official.

A serious administrator attended by servants.

Palace doors from a Nigerian town, carved about 1895, commemorate the reception given for the first British administrator who is seen (right, second row) arriving in a hammock.

III. New Nation on the Niger

The defiance of the northern emirates inspired resistance in some of the nearer, already occupied provinces. Late in 1902, a British resident named Captain Moloney, unarmed and helplessly crippled by an old wound, was slain by the Magaji of Keffi in the Magaji's palace. The murderer fled north to Kano where the Emir fêted him for killing a British official.

"If the life of a European can be taken with impunity," Lugard said, "the prestige of the government would be gone, and prestige is another word for self-preservation in a country where millions are ruled by a few score." Perhaps he had little confidence in the Colonial Office being able to grasp this point, because it was not from their Nigerian High Commissioner but from a Reuter dispatch in *The Times* that Lugard's superiors learned, in December, 1902, that he was preparing an expedition against Kano.

The cables that went crackling off to Zungeru were phrased in the usual diplomatic understatement – "The information in possession of His Majesty's Government is not so complete as they could have wished" – but Lugard knew what they meant. "The government were in an insane funk re: Kano," he wrote to his brother later. "Censured me for going at it 'without asking Mamma' . . . and if we'd messed it, I should have been broke."

Fortunately, the force he dispatched in January, 1903, did not "mess" it. Numerical odds were overwhelmingly against Colonel Thomas Morland and his 800 men, but after shelling the gate off the first town on the road to Kano, Morland met no more resistance until he reached the fabled city itself. There, behind walls 50 feet high and 40 feet thick, was an army of 6,000 Fulanis. The British breached a gate and felled 1,200 of the fleeing defenders with artillery-fire.

Lugard went to Kano soon after its conquest and took over the palace of the Emir, who had departed with his army and, cannily, with every one of his possible heirs. Sir Frederick's first order was to close the slave-market. "So well, however, is our policy known," he wrote with pleasure later, "that the slave market had closed itself."

Kano's fleeing leaders, meanwhile, were falling out among themselves. The Emir deserted his army and slunk away disguised as a salt merchant. One of his chief brothers, the Wombai, decided to make peace with Lugard and started back to Kano with 10,000 Fulanis. Another brother, the Waziri, was determined to continue the fight. His army of 3,000 encountered a British scouting-party of two white officers and 45 native troops, who took cover behind a flimsy barricade of mimosa branches. After ten furious charges the Fulani dead – including the Waziri and seven principal chiefs – were piled up to within 15 feet of the British position. None of Lugard's men was killed.

At Kano, Lugard welcomed the returning Wombai and explained his policy to a meeting of chiefs. Under his plan of "indirect rule," the government would retain the existing system of authority, but would itself appoint emirs and chief officers. They could continue to live by Muslim law where it did not conflict with the laws of the Protectorate. There would be no general emancipation, but slave-raiding and -trading was forbidden. He named the Wombai as the new Emir.

He had sent the army ahead to Sokoto and now set off to follow it. The odds it faced there on March 14 were even more formidable than at Kano. A Fulani force of 15,000 horse and 3,000 foot were drawn up before the city. By now, however, the reputation of the Maxim gun was well established. Some hundred Muslims died in brave charges, but most of them – including the Sultan of Sokoto and the Magaji of Keffi, who were to die in another battle four months later – dispersed. Having lost only one man, the conquerors marched into an almost deserted Sokoto.

Lugard stayed five days to install a Sultan and repeat the explanations he had given the Kano chiefs. He then rushed on to Katsina where, barely pausing, he confirmed the rule of the existing Emir, who had offered no resistance, before continuing to Zaria where he deposed a recalcitrant Sultan and appointed a new one. Within a month and a half, and with a force that never numbered more than 700 African troops and 35 British officers, he had completely overturned an old and powerful empire.

Ruling this gigantic territory, Lugard knew, would be more difficult than conquering it. "It is obvious that we cannot in any sense administer it," he said. "We must utilize the existing machinery and endeavour only to improve it." His famous concept of "indirect rule" was not truly new. It was, in fact, as old as the Roman Empire. And the alternative policy, under which purely British institutions were imposed on to alien cultures, had already shown itself unworkable during the 19th Century, as great areas were added to the Empire in rapid succession. Indirect rule of a kind was being practised in India and elsewhere. Lugard became its most noted exponent for his special application of the idea.

His approach has been criticized on the grounds that it held back the political development of the Africans, keeping them enthralled to old tribal structures. It is true that in some respects it ran counter to British ideals of democracy and equality. On maintaining the old Fulani rule he said candidly: "I am anxious to utilize, if possible, their wonderful intelligence, for they are born rulers, and incomparably above the negroid tribes in ability." But he contained and softened their traditional despotism by the rule of British law.

He appointed the higher ranking native officials and let them, in turn, choose their own headmen. He barred European officers from native courts, lest it would appear the African judges had "lost all power." But he overruled emirs who, for political reasons, wanted to keep their district headmen close at hand. Lugard insisted the headmen go out and actually administer their districts. In practice, British officers had to play the administrative concerto by ear to strike the delicate balance between African authority and theirs. In sophisticated emirates, British residents could truly function as advisers; in small pagan domains, they often were, in reality, the local government.

While Lagos Colony and Southern Nigeria, with their palm-oil trade, were becoming self-sufficient, there was little economic development in Lugard's territory. White plantations like those being established in East Africa might have helped create more wealth, but he envisaged Nigeria as an African country. His wife, the former Flora Shaw, once *The Times*' Colonial Correspondent and still a woman of tremendous political influence, pressed the government in London to spend more developing the country. The Lugards' efforts eventually

were rewarded, but only years later.

During this period, Whitehall was not at all sure that their man in Nigeria was doing what they wanted him to do. The belief that Britain's involvement in West Africa should be no more than that which proved profitable or denied influence to France was still paramount. In January, 1906, Lugard cabled London that he was sending troops to subdue the Munshi tribe, which had attacked its neighbours and blocked navigation on the Benue. Winston Churchill, the new Colonial Under-Secretary, minuted to his boss, Lord Elgin: "I incline to the opinion that we should withdraw from a very large portion of the territory which we now occupy nominally, but really disturb without governing . . . I see no reason . . . why these savage tribes should not be allowed to eat each other without restraint."

Lord Elgin did not order that the force be recalled, but Lugard knew that once again he had climbed out on to a dangerous limb with his career and reputation. Thus he was dumbfounded when, on February 15, he received an urgent telegram from the other end of the country, near Sokoto: ". . . whole of C Company, Mounted Infantry, defeated and annihilated at Satiru."

It was a new rising by Mahdists, adherents of the cult that 20 years before had embroiled Britain in a major conflict in the Sudan. A man who proclaimed himself to be Jesus had exhorted Nigerian followers of the Mahdi to rise against the whites. The whole town of Satiru had responded, massacring 70 soldiers sent from Sokoto. Mahdism was virulently infectious; the rebellion could spread. Most of Lugard's troops were in Munshi country, 500 miles from Sokoto and four days beyond the telegraph. Only 25 native infantry and four Europeans were in the area of the new crisis. If the Sultan of Sokoto or other leading emirs joined the rising, Lugard's five years of work could be undone overnight.

After five suspenseful days Lugard heard the news: the emirs had rallied to him. The Sultan of Sokoto took the Europeans in his city under his personal protection. The conclusion was a grisly one. The whole population of Sokoto marched on Satiru, razed the town, slaughtered its inhabitants, and impaled the heads of the leading rebels on spears. This savage retaliation, which Lugard learned about too late to stop, provoked an outcry in Great Britain.

On the most basic level, however, that of simply being able to maintain control of a vast and populous area with very few men, Lugard's policy of indirect rule had been vindicated by the outcome of the crisis. Nigeria was still British.

Even after this triumph, Lugard felt the Liberal government had less than complete confidence in him. They had rejected a scheme whereby he would divide his time between Nigeria and London. His main object was to have more influence on Nigerian affairs at both ends, but the rejection was a personal as well as professional defeat. His wife, Flora, had found life in West Africa impossible and could not return there. Lugard resigned.

To his surprise he was offered a plum post, the governorship of Hong Kong, but it was not to be the end of his associations with Nigeria. After five years in Hong Kong he received an offer that he called "about the biggest job in the whole British Empire and one of the most difficult." The three Nigerian protectorates were to be united under the administration of a single governor. The man selected as most qualified to establish this new nation was, naturally, Sir Frederick

Hausa chiefs of Northern Nigeria meet their new rulers in what the caption to this 1903 picture called "almost unknown" Katsina. British knowledge of their newly acquired West African Empire was sketchy: Katsina was a principal Hausa city.

Royal Artillery, 1814